

# But what about Australian beer?

The Australians feel compelled to ask, but riled by a candid answer

"You have upset an entire nation. You could not have done better if you had tried," I was told, more than once. "After doubting Christ's virgin birth, this is the next greatest sacrilege," observed one major newspaper, The Melbourne Age.

Unlike John Lennon, I had not claimed to be more famous than Jesus. Nor had I doubted that the king had any new clothes - not quite. Remember John Cleese, as Basil Fawlty, and the mantra: "Don't mention the war"? All the way from Heathrow to Melbourne, I had inwardly recited: "Don't mention bland, frozen, beer."

Having been to Australia before, I knew what to expect. Nowhere else in the world do people quite as insistently ask: "What do you think of our country?" My ready answer should have been flattery enough for even the most insecure nation: "You have fearsome Rugby League players." Ever since an Australian kid at junior school fractured my jaw behind the scrum, I have been unable to close my mouth properly. Perhaps that's my problem.

All the infamous names, from Castlemaine Foux to Foster's, are international-style lagers. People in Melbourne tend to dismiss Foster's in favour of Victoria Bitter (it is actually a lager), from the same brewhouse (or, as Foster's once described it to me, "wort production facility"). Foster's and VB start as the same brew, but a dash more hop-extract as added to the latter.

The best-known Australian lagers are lightened and cheapened by the use of cane sugar, rather than rice (as in the U.S.) or maize (as in Britain), but none of those three ingredients is anything on which to hang flags.

Foster's subsidiary Matilda Bay has a chocolatey dark lager, which "borrows" the English name Dogbolter. It is not especially Australian, but I tried citing it as a favourite. No one seemed to have heard of it. The potent, Burragorang Bock, the spritzzy Redback wheat beer, the nutty Toohey's Old Ale? No one gave a XXXX.

The beer question could not be evaded. That is why I was there: to judge at the Australian International Beer Awards. This is the only professional judging of the world's beers to be held annually, and is one of the big three competitions for brewers. The other two are held in Britain and the U.S., every alternate year.

Recognising that beer is made from grain (and sometimes cane sugar), the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria organises the event, and the judges are provided by the University of Ballarat, which has a brewing course. The other judges were all qualified brewers, which means

that they had learned more about micro-biology and bio-chemistry than I would ever wish to know.

Like all such judges, they were astonishingly good at saying why they thought a beer was bad: a hint of oxidation (cardboardy flavours); too much diacetyl (butterscotch, death in a lager but desirable in some types of ale); excessive dimethyl sulphide (new-mown hay; good in a lager, but should be only a hint). Positive judgments tend to be by default: "clean, well-balanced." Once, judging American "light" lagers, I asked a brewing scientist colleague what flavours we should be experiencing. "None," she answered brightly.

The Australians had invited me, as a writer on beer, specifically to report the good news: the positive aromas and flavours, not so much in their mass-market lagers but in the more specialised beers from smaller breweries. "Boutique" beers are not as well understood in Australia as they are in Britain and the U.S. The Australians also hoped that my presence as an author with a new book would attract press interest to the judging. That worked.

I had hardly started on Australian lagers (beer no. 814: "hint dimethyl sulphide; very dry start; then malty sweetness; spritzy and refreshing" - later turned out to be Fourex) than I had to retire to answer questions from the press.

"What do you think of Australia?" they chorused. I should have said: "Your reporters are the most thorough in the world, though Britain has the best sub-editors" (to paraphrase Rupert Murdoch, squashing his fellow-American newspapermen some years ago).

A diligent agency reporter had been upicking the web. He had found an article I had contributed to About About Beer, in which I had observed "the more macho, muscular and tanned a society, the blander its beers. See Deep South and Australia".

The reporter suggested I was saying that Australian beer was bad. I stressed that I was not. Most international-style lagers were boring; most people liked this kind of unchallenging beer; products like Foster's, for example, were extremely popular in Britain. I added, by way of backhanded credit, that it was very difficult to make such products. He did not ask why. The answer is that dimethyl sulphide, etcetera, occur naturally in fermentation. They can be masked in a maltier lager, a hoppier ale, a toastier stout, but not in a beer that is intended to be tasteless. If any flavours survive, they can be covered only by extreme cold.

"So it wasn't entirely an insult?" asked one radio presenter next morning. "When in a hole, stop digging," advised the newspaper The Australian, adding that I was a "Pommie bastard". This is a term of affection, I was assured by my remaining Australian friends.

One of them, actor Paul Mercurio, star of the Australian low-budget classic Strictly Ballroom, joined for me a visit to an unbland Australian brewery, Cooper's, in Adelaide. Paul wanted to shoot me there for a pilot of a television series. Instead, he filmed three news crews reporting on the Pommies' congenital defect of liking "warm" beer. A fourth crew filmed us drinking the

yeastily assertive Cooper's Stout with our lunchtime oysters. "What do you think of Australia, Mr Jackson?" Great Stout, I told them. I was learning fast.

"Let's get beyond the nationwide storm that your comments have precipitated," smiled a more cerebral radio interviewer. Thank heavens for that. "Let's look at the underlying issues." Oh, dear. "Why is beer so fundamental to national pride?" A good question. "Well the Czechs and Germans are proud of their Pilsner lagers, the Belgians of their Lambics, the British and Irish of their ales and stouts, the Australians of..." Stop digging. By now, friends in Britain were phoning me to say that the "story" had "broken" in Fleet Street. I tuned into CNN, hoping for an update on this new threat to world peace.

When international issues loom, the place to be is the capital. In Canberra, I went for a pint of cask-conditioned Bitter at the Wig and Pen, a pub with its own backroom brewery. "The leader of the National Party, Tim Fischer, will be in to see you," promised the pub's owner. "He is also Deputy Prime Minister, by the way." Fischer, en route to a meeting with the Philippines' Minister of Defence, popped in for a quick beer, but we met at Parliament House next morning.

"So you are the boutique brewery man?" I told him that I liked all beers, but more "boutique" breweries might help augment wine tourism in Australia. To my astonishment, I found myself in a series of conversations with the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister for Tourism, and the chief of staff to the Minister for Finance.

One asked why consumers liked bland beer. "No taste to distract from the task of getting alcohol to the brain," I suggested. If stronger beers were more expensive, would that curb excessive behaviour, I was asked. I pointed out that English soccer hooligans preferred Foster's to Thomas Hardy's Ale at three times the strength.

So which is the tastiest beer in Australia? The Grand Champion and best Australian lager was Sydney's splendidly hoppy Hahn Premium, designed by an American. Champion dark ale was the robust Full Sail, from an American-owned brewery in Sydney. Champion pale ale was the beautifully balanced Best Bitter, infused in a domestic bathtub at Bell's pub, in Melbourne. Awards in the international section went to Samuel Adams' Boston Lager, Old Peculier and the Belgian beer Forbidden Fruit.

My judging technique inspired a final comment from the satirical TV show Good News Week: "The Pommie way to drink beer is take a little in your mouth, then spit it into a bucket. The Australian way is to drink a great deal then put it into a cab home."

That's self-deprecating Australian humor. Throwing up in taxis was not something I had mentioned.

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